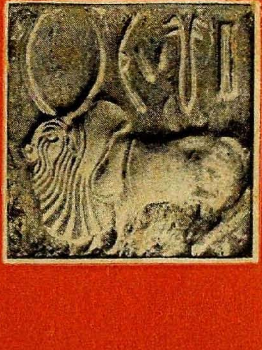
# INDIAN SYSTEMS OF WRITING



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Here are seven talks broadcast by All India Radio in the National Programme of Talks in the series, *Indian Systems of Writing*. Delivered by distinguished scholars, the talks deal with the origin and development of the various scripts in India; they underline their common source, the Brāhmī of ancient India, and thereby bring out India's cultural unity.

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# BRĀHMĪ—THE MOTHER OF INDIAN SCRIPTS

SUNITI KUMAR CHATTERJI

The sub-continent of India is a vast region, now embracing the three independent States of India proper (or Bharat), Pakistan and Nepal. It shows, in its natural or geographical setup as well as in its population, a unique diversity against the background of a remarkable unity which is basic or fundamental. Almost all the various types of climate, excepting the arctic, are found here; and in her population India is a veritable museum of races and languages, cultures and religions. Yet, there is an underlying unity behind all this variety. Different peoples came to India at different times, each with its special racial type, language, religion and culture, but after they had all settled down side by side, a great intermingling of races and cultures started from prehistoric times, resulting in the emergence of a mixed Indian people with a composite culture of its own, in the evolution of which all the component elements were represented. In the evolution or development of languages in India we see this process of miscegenation at work. The Aryan speech, after it came to India, assimilated with the pre-Aryan languages—the Dravidian, the Austric and the Indo-Mongoloid—and a common speech gradually evolved. It had some common characteristics, although in their origin, in their roots and formative elements, as well as in their words—their *sprachgut* or "Speech-commodity"—they were different.

In the matter of writing, we find a long history from prehistoric times before the coming of the Aryans down to recent years. Until the discovery by excavation of the prehistoric and pre-Aryan city sites of Mohen-jo-Daro in northern Sind and Harappa in South Punjab, the oldest writing known in India was the Maurya script, used in the inscriptions of Aśoka and in a few

old coins and inscriptions which date back to the 3rd century B.C. Here we are in broad daylight, although it was only over a century ago, in 1837, that the Brāhmī script could be read and understood for the first time. Throughout the whole of India, we have inscriptions of Emperor Aśoka in different forms of Prakrit in the Brāhmī script; and decade by decade and century by century, this script has gone on evolving on the soil of India. In North India, through various stages like Kuṣāṇa Brāhmī, Gupta Brāhmī and Siddhamātṛkā of the 7th century A.D., we arrive, through the Nagara style of writing at the Siddhamātṛkā, and through the Śāradā and the Kuṭila styles at the modern North Indian scripts. All these are related to each other as distant cousins and going back to their common source, the Brāhmī of Aśoka,—scripts like the Nāgarī (or Devanāgarī), Bengali, Assamese, Oriya, Maithilī, Śāradā, Gurmukhi, Laṇḍā, etc.

In South India, there was a similar development of Brāhmī, and by the middle of the 6th century we come to the Pallava script, whence originated the modern Telugu and Kannada scripts, the Malayalam and the Grantha script (Sanskrit is written and printed in the Grantha script in the Tamil country) and the Tamil script. We have no inscriptions or other writings prior to the Aśokan Brāhmī of the 3rd century B.C. Long ago, there were discovered in grave sites in South India, painted on pot-sherds, certain letter-like symbols or signs, mostly occurring singly. They do not seem to be letters of any alphabet or syllabary or system of writing, but rather appear to be individual signs or marks, such as are, for example, used in branding cattle to indicate ownership. Similar symbols are found on the oldest coins of India—the square or oblong pieces in silver or copper known as *purāṇas* which go back to the centuries just before the Christian era. Then, quite a mass of short inscriptions came to light after the Mohen-jo-Daro site was discovered in North Sind, and in Harappa in South Punjab. These were found on seals of soft stones, and they look like simple letters and combinations of letters. An inventory has been made of these letters, and their number comes up to over a hundred. In the Mohen-jo-Daro script, which goes back to 3500 B.C. and beyond, several strata

are noticed. The one which is supposed to be the youngest or most advanced in development (following the first stratum in which the signs appear to be pictograms or crude pictures of objects, and the second stratum which might represent syllables rather than pictures or simple alphabetical letters) has simple shapes for the signs, depicted like linear writing. There is a superficial agreement between this youngest or linear phase of Mohen-jo-Daro writing of the period before 1500 or 2000 B.C. and the Brāhmī script of the 3rd century B.C. Some of the Mohen-jo-Daro signs resemble or are almost identical with Brāhmī letters. Some others are a bit complicated. What is most important, in some of the Mohen-jo-Daro signs, it would appear that the Brāhmī characteristic of tagging on vowel signs to the consonant letters is also found, besides combinations of two or more consonants.

This brings us to the question of the origin of the Brāhmī script. Most scholars until recently thought that the Brāhmī script was derived from the ancient Phoenician script of, say, 1200 B.C., itself a derivative of the still more ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, through the later Demotic style. A direct derivation of Brāhmī from the Phoenician writing through Mesopotamia was thought possible. About the middle of the first millennium B.C., or a little earlier, it was believed that Indian merchants who used to go by sea to Baveru or Babylon saw that writing was in vogue there, and got both the idea and the very simple Phoenician letters in Babylon, and modified it to suit the Indian Prakrit they spoke, and so evolved the Brāhmī writing. Others thought that the South Arabian form of Phoenician was the immediate source of Brāhmī. But there are some basic divergences between Phoenician writing on the one hand and Brāhmī on the other, which make this affiliation a little difficult to accept. On the other hand, the agreements between the linear and later Mohen-jo-Daro script and Brāhmī would suggest that Brāhmī was derived from the former, and was gradually perfected by 300 B.C. It would appear very reasonable to think that some time in the 10th century B.C. the compilers of the Vedic literature of songs and hymns and short prose directives in connection with the

ritual of their predecessors evolved a kind of Proto-Brāhmī script from the latest linear Mohen-jc-Daro writing, and this is how Brāhmī came into existence. Of course, to start with, it could not be a perfect or full system of writing, expressing in all its niceties the entire sound-system or phonological habits of the Aryan speech of the time, which was a late form of Vedic. There was also a suggestion that the Brāhmī letters originated independently in India from pictures of objects, the initial sound of the Sanskrit names of which was associated with the picture, which finally became the letter for that sound. Thus the Brāhmī letter for *dh*, which was shaped like the Roman capital D, was a picture of the bow, *Dhanu*, and then this picture became a letter and had the value of *dh*. So Brāhmī *n* is shaped like the Roman capital inverted T, ⊥, and this denoted the nose—*nāsā;* and so on with most of the letters. But this is extremely fanciful, and there is no evidence to establish this kind of derivation.

The Brāhmī letters have the great beauty of simplicity—they stand bold and clear, statuesque and columnar, like Greek and Latin letters (capitals) or ancient Phoenician letters. There is no *mātrā* or top-line or flourish, and compared with Brāhmī, Nāgarī or Telugu, Śāradā or Grantha, are very complicated and cumbersome scripts indeed. Brāhmī letters are so simple in their structure that an Indian familiar with any of the modern descendants of Brāhmī can pick it up in a few hours. It lends itself to decorative treatment in its grandeur of simplicity, and the acquisition of Brāhmī by an Indian intellectual of to-day can be a very easily acquired accomplishment with its attendant historical and cultural value.

So far as we know, the Aryans had no system of writing of their own when they came to India and all their literature was, as in the case of many primitive peoples, entirely oral. But there is evidence that, as in some of the most ancient countries outside India like Egypt and Babylon, Asia Minor and China, pre-Aryan India, too, had her own system of writing. The oldest Sanskrit script goes back to the early centuries of the Christian era and Sanskrit inscriptions are written in the characters of that period which are but modifications of the earlier ancient Indian Brāhmī

of the 3rd century B.C. In between the coming of the Aryans which might have happened round about 1500 B.C. and the use of Brāhmī as in the Aśoka inscriptions of the 3rd century B.C. what was the script in which the Aryan speakers wrote their language? Until now, European scholars thought that Indian merchants going to Mesopotamia and to some of the western countries like Egypt from the beginning of the first millennium B.C. learnt the art of writing from there and that they modified some form of Phoenician writing into the ancient Indian script—Brāhmī which may have taken its rise sometime before 500 B.C. But we have now found out that there was this Mohen-jo-Daro system of writing in its various stages of development and in the last stage, there appears to be some agreement with the Brāhmī writing of the 3rd century B.C. It would be most reasonable to assume that the Brāhmī script in its very ancient form as a sort of Proto-Brāhmī was developed out of the youngest form of the Mohen-jo-Daro script. Thus, the origin of the Brāhmī script and its subsequent developments in the succeeding centuries was native Indian. Step by step, this original Brāhmī went on changing. It was oridinary Aśokan Brāhmī in the 3rd century B.C., about the time of Christ it became modified into what is known as Kuṣāṇa Brāhmī, then about 400 A.D. it became Gupta Brāhmī, and then in the 7th century A.D., it came to be known as the Siddhamātṛkā form of writing. Ultimately, by about 1000 A.D., it became a kind of Proto-Nāgarī and a Proto-Kuṭila script, which is the ultimate mother of Bengali-Assamese, Maithilī, Newārī and Oriya and also of the ancient Śāradā script of Kashmir, and of both the Kashmir script still known as Śāradā and Gurmukhi. In South India, the history was somewhat analogous. In the middle of the 7th century A.D., it became the developed Pallava script which is the ultimate mother of the four great systems of writing in the South—the Telugu, the Kannada, the Tamil including Grantha, and the Malayalam.

# THE DEVANĀGARĪ SCRIPT

V. S. Agrawala

Devanāgarī is the name of the premier Indian script which is in use from Rajasthan to Bihar and from the Himalayan districts to the lower limits of Madhya Pradesh. Hindi, the literary language of this vast region, as well as its several dialects are written in the Devanāgarī script. Marathi also employs the Devanāgarī script under the name of Bāḷabodha and to a large extent in Gujarat also, Devanāgarī is the script of the Sanskrit Śāstras.

It is a fact universally recognised that Devanāgarī is the direct descendant of the ancient Brāhmī script which was the national alphabet of India. The inventors of Brāhmī were the learned Brahmins who claimed its origin from Brahmā, the fountain-head of all speech and literature. However, there is no doubt that Brāhmī was framed by them originally for writing Sanskrit and then used for Prakrits also. The fully developed Brāhmī system reflects the remarkable philological and phonological precision, wherein the early Indians even prior to the time of Pāṇini and Yāska surpassed all ancient peoples. Brāhmī may be truly regarded as the marvel of the Indian mind by its clear division of all the basic sounds of the alphabet through well-arranged signs for vowels and consonants. There are at first the simple vowels and diphthongs. Then follow the gutturals, palatals, cerebrals, dentals and labials divided into five groups of mutes known in India as *Kavarga*, *Chavarga*, *Ṭavarga*, *Tavarga* and *Pavarga* respectively. At the end of these 25 consonants, there are four semi-vowels and a group of three sibilants and one aspirate. If we add to these consonants the total number of vowel signs both in their short and long versions and their simple and diphthong forms, we get 47 or 48 signs in almost all the Indian scripts, as they are in Devanāgarī also.

It should be remembered that Brāhmī as the most ancient script of India during Aśokan times (3rd century B.C.) served as the true national script approved by the central secretariat of Pāṭaliputra and was engraved on boulders and pillars from Kalsi in the Himalayas to Siddhapur in Mysore and from Girnar in Saurashtra to Dhauli and Jaugarh in Orissa. The other remarkable fact about the Indian scripts is that not only Devanāgarī but all other scripts in which the languages and dialects of the South and the North are written have all been derived from the parent Brāhmī script by a process of natural evolution controlling the course of Indian culture through the ages. The essential unity of the Indian languages is fully reflected in their scripts. This is true of Hindi, Kashmiri, Punjabi, Rajasthani, Gujarati, Marathi, Oriya, Bengali, Bihari, Maithili and Assamese. The four South Indian languages are also written in scripts derived from Brāhmī and have an exceptionally rich element of Sanskrit vocables, excepting Tamil in which the Sanskrit element is comparatively less although its religious and cultural background is of Sanskritic tradition.

The Brāhmī script underwent an evolution after the time of Aśoka in the form of Śuṅgan Brāhmī in the 2nd century B.C., Kuṣāṇa Brāhmī in the first century A.D. and the Gupta script in North India during the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. Because of the Gupta empire extending from Bengal to Kashmir and from Nepal to the South, the Gupta script, which was a developed form of Brāhmī, spread all over North India and also in the Deccan under a box-headed variety and also in the far south in the form of the Pallava script with long vertical tails. During the sixth and seventh centuries, there was a further evolution, due specially to the cursive form of the Gupta script which was given the name of Siddhamātṛkā and which became the universal script for writing religious texts right from India to Central Asia and to Japan. The earliest manuscript in the Siddham lipi is in the Horiuzi temple in Japan written on palm-leaf in the cursive hand of the sixth century A.D. The term Kuṭila script was also applied to this nail-headed variety, but the same is not now approved and it appears that Siddham lipi was its correct name

since the alphabet written in that script was begun with the words *Om Namaḥ Siddham*, which in popular pronunciation became *Ona masi dham*. The inscription of Mahānāma at Bodha-Gayā (dated 588 A.D.) and the *praśasti* at Lakhamaṇḍala not much later, display top lines, slanting strokes, small wedged angles or acute angles also called nail-heads, which were the distinguishing features of the Nāgarī script.

During the 7th century, the earliest form of Nāgarī had clearly emerged and from the 8th century onwards, the Devanāgarī script was developed in full form. It was being employed for royal signatures, as in the case of that of King Jayabhaṭṭa in Gujarat, inscribing *Svahasto mama Jayabhaṭṭasya*, where *svahasta* literally means signature. The earliest oft-quoted inscription is that of Samangaḍ written in the time of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa king, Dantidurga, (dated 754 A.D.) and the same was followed by the Dhuliya inscription of Govindarāja II in 780 A.D. and then by other Rāṣṭrakūṭa kings; for example, the Paithan inscription of Govinda III (dated A.D. 794), and the Baroda inscription of Dhruvarāja (dated A.D. 835). Their feudatories, the Silahara rulers of Konkana, had also made use of the Nāgarī character in their inscriptions from Kanheri, dated A.D. 843 and 851.

It is now commonly accepted that from the 8th to the 10th century A.D., Nāgarī had reached its maturity and many palm-leaf manuscripts and inscriptions in Gujarat, Rajasthan and North Deccan were written in this script at the opening of the eleventh century. A host of rulers of the main and subsidiary dynasties like the Haihayas, the Paramāras, the Candellas, the Gāhaḍawālas, the Cāhamānas, and the Kacchapaghaṭas employed Devanāgarī in their numerous inscriptions. Another important point to be noted here is that the script was first developed in the Deccan in the 8th century, then in the North about the 10th century. It has also been widely used in many inscriptions of the Western Cālukyas, the Yādavas and the three Vijayanagara dynasties, and is still current in writing Sanskrit manuscripts in the South. While Devanāgarī is the name for the North Indian form, Nandināgarī is the name known for it in the Deccan.

An important question is that of the origin of the name Devanāgarī. It was once explained as the Nāgarī of the Gods, or Brāhmaṇas, or as Royal Nāgarī. We have now some recent evidence by which we could explain both the names, *i.e.*, Devanāgarī of the North and Nandināgarī of the South. In the newly discovered drama named *Pādatāḍitakam*, it is stated that Pāṭaliputra became famous as Nagara, that is, the Metropolitan city. The Gupta inscriptions inform that Deva was the personal name of Candragupta II Vikramāditya. Any mode or style connected with that city of the North was known as Nāgara or Nāgarī, *e.g.*, the Nāgara style of temple architecture, Nāgarī rekhā or the curvilinear lines of the *Śikhara* and in the same way Nāgarīlipi or the Northern script. As a counterpart to this was Nandinagar, a celebrated township in the Deccan (modern Nander) which was in the kingdom of the Vākāṭakas and later of the Rāṣṭrakūṭas. The two names may thus be clearly understood as the terms for the Northern and Southern varieties of the then prevailing script.

The Gupta script developed two forms, the Eastern and the Western, giving rise to the Bengali script in the East and Śāradā in the West current in Punjab and Kashmir. In the South, the Telugu, Kannada, Tamil, Malayalam and Grantha scripts are essentially based on the same process of evolution which gave rise to Devanāgarī. The Silahara kings of Konkana, the Rāṣṭrakūṭas of Mānyakheṭa, the Yādavas of Devagiri and the rulers of Vijayanagara were using the Nandināgarī script, south of the Vindhyas; whereas the Guhila rulers of Mewar and the Chauhan kings of Sambhara and Ajmer, the Gāhaḍawālas of Kannauj, the Solankis of Kathiawar and Gujarat, the Paramāras of Abu, the Candellas of Jejakbhukti and the Kalcharīs of Tripuri universally adopted the Devanāgarī of the North.

Alberuni, a polymath in Arabic and Sanskrit, states that an alphabet of Siddhamātṛkā was in use in Kashmir and Varanasi and it was named Nāgarī in Malwa, implying that it was the same Devanāgarī script in its two versions, viz., Śāradā and Nāgarī, both under the general name of Siddhamātṛkā. On the coins of Mahmud Ghazni the Sanskrit translation of the Arabic Kalima,

*Avyaktamekam Muhammad avatāra*, is written in clear Devanāgarī characters. A developed form of Devanāgarī continued on the coins of Muslim rulers like Alauddin and Sher Shah; and Akbar also used it on his *Ramasiya* coins, writing the name of *Ramasiya* in the clear Devanāgarī of the time of Tulasidasa. The essentially national character of the Brāhmī has descended on the Devanāgarī which is the main vehicle of various Indian languages and dialects between the Himalayas and Narmada, *i.e.*, Madhyadeśa, the holy land and centre of Indian civilization where Hindi is the means of communication of the learned and common men. Devanāgarī thus is the paramount script and its history is connected with Brāhmī and Sanskrit which form the backbone of the literary heritage of India.

# THE ASSAMESE-BENGALI SCRIPT

MAHESWAR NEOG

The systems of writing in all the new Indo-Aryan languages of Eastern India have one major point in common: they have been ultimately derived from the same mother script, namely, Brāhmī. The earliest Indian script known to us and now available to us for reading, Brāhmī has been traced back, so far, to about 300 B.C. It is the earliest because the writings of the pre-historic period, say, between the middle of the 3rd and the middle of the 2nd millenia B.C., discovered in Mohen-jo-Daro and Harappa have not been deciphered. In the pre-Aśokan and Aśokan inscriptions, Brāhmī in its fully developed form, was used for announcements in Prakrit; but from the second half of the 1st century B.C., it has also been found in Sanskrit inscriptions. In course of time, Brāhmī branched off into the various scripts of India and Greater India. Thus, the Central Devanāgarī, the Eastern Assamese-Bengali-Maithili-Newari-Oriya, the Northern Śāradā-Gurmukhi, the Western Kaithi-Gujarati, the Southern Telugu-Kannada and Tamil-Malayalam-Grantha-Sinhalese scripts derive themselves from Brāhmī. Besides these, the scripts of the Tibetan, the Mon-Burmese, the Cambodian-Siamese, the Javanese-Balinese and the Indonesian come from the same stock.

By the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D., Brāhmī developed into the Kuṣāṇa scripts; and in the Gupta period, there was the development of the two somewhat distinct styles—monumental or inscriptional, and cursive or written. Some distinctions also grew up between the Brāhmī of the North and the Brāhmī of the South. Under Harṣavardhana Śilāditya, the Siddhamātṛkā script became the final phase of Brāhmī, being used all over North India. But after Harsa there grew three different regional forms,

which Dr Chatterji categorises as Śāradā or North-Western, Śrīharṣa or South-Western and West Midland, and Kuṭila or Eastern.

The Kuṭila form extended over a large area from eastern Uttar Pradesh on the west to Kamarupa or Assam on the east, from Nepal on the north to Orissa on the south. In course of time, the Devanāgarī script, being a development of the Śrīharṣa type, has replaced Kuṭila in eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Nepal; but the Maithili and Newari forms of Kuṭila still survive and struggle. In the beginning, at least Bengali, Assamese and Maithili formed one script, Oriya being a development from it. There are a few other scripts, now dying out or dead, in the eastern region. The Ahoms, a Shan people, who ruled over Assam for six centuries, wrote their Tai language in a sort of modification of Dakṣiṇī Brāhmī brought over from Burma. This script is now left as a tattered remnant in the form of Buddhist works in Tai, which are sometimes copied by monks for the laity among a few Shan tribes in eastern Assam. The complicated script of the Meithei or Manipuri has been displaced by the use of the Bengali script among them. A form of Devanāgarī, known as Śilāit Nāgarī, has been in restricted use among the Muslims, particularly Muslim ladies of Sylhet. This was employed in making copies of the writings of the *pirs*. Another locally used script is the Lepcha or Rong, used to write the Lepcha language of Darjeeling and Sikkim, which has been employed by the Christian missionaries in printing also. It is a modification of the Tibetan script, which, in its turn, is borrowed from the Indian soil.

It is supposed that the Kuṭila script was prevalent in northern India from the 6th to the 9th century A.D. It has been called Kuṭilākṣara or Kuṭilalipi even in old records, perhaps due to the fact of the *mātrā* or top line of its letters being a little crooked in shape. This script has been observed in a number of inscriptions, coins and manuscripts in various parts of the region, *e.g.*, the three inscriptions of Yaśodharman found at Mandasor, one being dated 581 Samvat (532 A.D.); the two inscriptions of Mahānāman, found at Bodh-Gayā, of about 588 A.D.; the

coins and inscriptions of the Maukharis (6th century); the epigraphs of Amśuvarman of Nepal (7th century); the epigraphs of Śilāditya and Aparājita of the Guhila dynasty of Mewar (672 A.D.); the inscriptions of Ādityasena of the Gupta dynasty of Magadha (later 7th century) and Jīvitagupta II (early 8th century); the *Prajñāpāramitā* and *Uṣṇīṣavijayādharaṇī* manuscripts which are to be found in the Buddhist temple of Horiuzi, in Japan.

The individualisation of the Eastern script can be marked through these writings. Palaeographists like Banerji would think that although the Bodh-Gayā inscription of Mahānāman was found in North-Eastern India, some western India characteristics persist in it. The Shahpur image-inscription of the year 66 of the Harṣa era, that is, 671 A.D., and the undated Aphsad inscription, both of the time of Ādityasena of Magadha, however, indicate the first attempts at Eastern individualisation in vowels like *a*, *a*, *u*, *o*, and the consonants, *k*, *kh*, etc. Further characterisation of the Eastern variety is seen in Jīvitagupta's pillar-inscription of Deo-Baranark and epigraphs variously referring to other kings of the region.

Among the Bengal inscriptions of characteristic importance are the Khalimpur grant and the Bodh-Gayā image inscription of Dharmapāla—the last part of the 8th century; the inscriptions of Devapāla (Munger, Ghosrawa), Nārāyaṇapāla (Badal, Bhagalpur), Mahendrapāla (Dighwa-Dubhauli, Ramgaya)—9th century; the inscriptions of other Pāla kings like Gopāla II, Mahīpāla I, Nayapāla, Rāmapāla, Vijayasena (Deopara)—10th & 11th centuries.

In the 12th century, we find the final establishment of the Eastern script in such inscriptions of Bengal as the Manda inscription of the time of Gopāla III; the Tarpandighi grant Madhainagar inscription and Dacca image inscription of Lakṣmaṇasena; the Bodh-Gayā inscription of Aśokacalla of 1170 A.D.; the Gadādhara temple inscription of 1175 A.D.; and the Cambridge manuscripts, *Pañcakāra*, *Yogaratnamālā* and *Guhyāvali-vivṛti*.

Quite a good number of copper-plate and stone inscriptions and clay seals of Kāmarūpa kings have been discovered. They clearly indicate the line of development of the Eastern script in

old Assam in an unbroken continuity. The earliest of these finds are the Umāchala and Barganga stone inscriptions of Surendravarman (c. 5th century) and Bhūtivarman (c. 6th century). Then we have got the Doobi and Nidhanpur copper-plates and the Nalanda clay seals of the mighty monarch, Bhāskaravarman (7th century), and the Hayungthul copper-plate and the Tezpur rock inscription of Harjāravarman (early 9th century). The following inscriptions lead us through the later centuries of palaeographic development: the Deopani image inscription of the 9th century; Vanamālavarmadeva's Tezpur and Parbatiya epigraphs (middle of the 9th century); Balavarman III's Howraghat and Nowgong grants (the juncture of the 9th and 10th centuries); Ratnapāla's Bargaon and Suwalkuchi grants and Indrapāla's Gauhati and Guwakuchi grants (11th century); Dharmapāla's Khonakuchi, Śubhaṅkarapatākā and Puṣpabhadra grants (early 12th century); Jayapāla's Silimpur stone slab grant found in the Bogra District of Bengal (12th century); Vaidyadeva's Kamauli grant found near Varanasi (12th century); Vallabhadeva's Assam plates of 1185 A.D.; Kanai-barasi-bowa rock inscription of 1206 A.D.

A close scrutiny of the characters employed in these old records would lead us to the conclusion that there was only one Eastern script descending from the Kuṭila type of Brāhmī. Some local forms are evident in these writings, while the great majority retains the form of older scripts in the same, or in a similar, shape. Among the new local formations *e* and *ai* open on the left; *n* and dental *t* may be noted. Two other striking features, which were dropped in modern Bengali-Assamese, are a small triangle with the rounded lower side and the "Nepalese hooks" attached to the tops of the various letters.

This Eastern script was the source of the Bengali-Assamese, Maithili and Oriya scripts. The same alphabet, which was current in Mithila and Bengal, was also used in Magadha in pre-Muslim days. But, since the Muslim conquest of Magadha, the Kaithi script of northern and western India occupied its place and still continues to do so, the Maithili alphabet being used only by the Brahmans and other higher castes. With the spread of

Hindi in the area, Devanāgarī has come to be used in the printing of Maithili books. Almost all the members of the Maithili alphabet are to be found in Bengali-Assamese, and the few not found to-day are traceable in some of the old writings.

As Nepal lies contiguous to old Mithila and other parts of the eastern region, the Newari script is also an evolute of the old Eastern script.

The Eastern script has taken a peculiar form in Orissa with a characteristic top-loop looking like an umbrella spread over the characters. This divergence began right in the 15th century. Two things seem to have been there to account for this. In old Orissa, the scribes used an iron stylus in making palm-leaf manuscripts, which necessitated the avoidance of angular strokes. Secondly, the influence of the Telugu script of the neighbouring Andhra country must have something to do in the shaping of Orissa's style of writing.

The Assamese-Bengali script developed somewhat vigorously since the period of the various inscriptions. As time advanced, more and more numerous became the records that have come down to us. Besides rock-cut and copper-plate inscriptions of the rulers of Assam and Bengal, we find the great number of literary works written on tree-barks like the *sachipāt* or Agar wood leaves and *bhūrjapatra* and paper of various qualities. In Assam, this script became known as *asamakṣara* for the sake of distinction from the Perso-Arabic alphabet and the Ahom script, which were also employed in some of the old grants. There appeared variations in this Assam script; and as many as three or four types of the script were now to be distinguished. The most widely used type was known as "Gargaya akhar" possibly because it had its main centre of culture in the Ahom capital, Gargao. The traditional Sanskrit scholars had their own style, generally used in the preparation of copies of Sanskrit texts. The writer caste, Kāyasthas, again, stuck to their own method of writing mainly in their books of accounts and the official documents. Their system was known as Kaithali or, sometimes, Lahkari. The famous metrical work on arithmetic, *Kitābat-mañjarī*, and Sukumar Barkath's *Hastividyārṇava* have been

found copied in this style. Sometimes the copyist is seen to have vacillated between two styles. But whatever be the small variations in style, the system of writing, broadly speaking, is the same.

The Assamese and Bengali scripts had parallel and, sometimes, identical growth. With the introduction of the printing press, right in the beginning of the 19th century, the small differences between Assamese and Bengali and in their own bodies separately have disappeared except in two members of the alphabet *r* and *v/w*. For both these characters as well as for *b*, the Eastern script had adopted the triangular formation very early. Today, the Assamese and Maithili *r* has a line in the middle of the triangle, unlike the Bengali *r* with a dot at the bottom; but the Assamese-Maithili *r* is detectable also in Bengal from the early manuscript of *Śrīkṛṣṇakīrtana* up to the official documents of the 19th century. In Bengali, no distinction is made between *b* and *v*, while in Assamese *v* has a line at the bottom. The Maithili *b* and *v* are distinguished by the use of a diacritical mark at the top and a dot at the bottom respectively. These are all very minor variations in the modern Eastern scripts.

The history of the growth of different systems of Indian writing reveals the fact that there is a great unity in the midst of the apparent diversity. This fact points to the fundamental cultural unity of India, and the understanding of this small fact may very well promote emotional integration. The growth of flowers and leaves of different sizes and shapes on the same tree does not in any way indicate that all of them are independent entities, because we must remember the same soil and the same root on which they stand and from which they derive their beauty.

## THE SCRIPTS OF SOUTH INDIA

(Tamil, Malayalam, Grantha, etc.)

T.P. MEENAKSHISUNDARAN

The southernmost group of writing systems in India consists of the Tamil script, the Malayalam script and the Grantha script. All these, like other Indian scripts, can be traced to the Brāhmī script which was so widespread during the reign of Aśoka, thanks to his edicts. But the scripts of the Tamil land are to be traced to a southern variety which may be considered unique in its own way. Grantha (meaning a book) was known as such because it was the script used for writing Sanskrit as distinct from the living languages or *bhāṣā*. This script developed also into the later Malayalam script at the Kerala court when Sanskrit words were used profusely in the Malayalam literature. A few Grantha letters are used in later Tamil as well.

The Tamil script has to be considered under two heads, the Cēra-Pāṇḍya script which is developed into the Vatteluttu*; the earliest inscriptions found in the Pāṇḍya country are in this script. The other script Kōl eḻuttu† is the Pallava-Cōla script. The Pallava-Cōla script has intimate relationship with the Grantha and Malayalam scripts, perhaps bearing the influence of the northern and central parts of the Peninsula, with which the Pallavas were connected. In a way, naturally this Kōl eluttu differs from the Vatteluttu developed earlier in the Tamil country.

The letters chiselled in the inscriptions had to keep up the straight lines, avoiding the curves as much as possible; for, curved lines are more difficult to be engraved on stone than the straight lines, though, in course of time, on account of the influence of the cursory writing, curves could not be avoided even when engraving on stone. Therefore,the Pallava-Cōla script

* *Vaṭṭeḻuttu.* † *Kōl eḻuttu.*

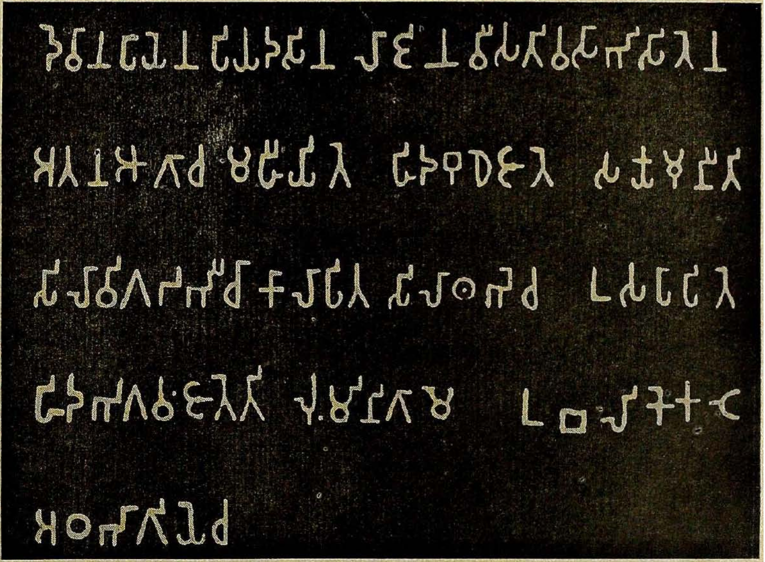
appears to be a series of symbols made of Kōl or lines as against the cursory writing system of Vatteluttu used also in manuscripts where the latter appears to be a series of symbols made of curves. Hence the name Vatteluttu.

The Vatteluttu which was used for writing the manuscripts which were all on palmyra leaves was written with an iron stylus turning on its axis, often on a pivot of a groove in the nail of the thumb of the writer's left hand, and therefore, assumed rounded forms ; straight lines are further likely to tear the palmyra leaves. Because of economy of time and energy, the tendency is to write the letters in a continuous chain, without keeping them as distinct isolated units. Thus developed a cursory style and, as a result of this, the Vatteluttu of the later age differed so very much from the original source that it is difficult for people who do not know the intermediate stages to believe that Vatteluttu really developed from the common Indian Brāhmī script.

It was because of the difficulty of reading this cursory style and also because of bringing about the unity in his empire through the inscriptions written in a common script that the Cōla Emperor Rājarāja the Great, displaced the Vatteluttu by Kōl eluttu even in the Pāṇḍya country. Since the Kōl eluttu was easier to read, the reform became permanent. But Vatteluttu continued to be used for manuscript writing in the Cēra country till late in the 18th century. Tracing the Vatteluttu to the Brāhmī origin, therefore, is more difficult than tracing the Kōl eluttu or Grantha-Malayalam script. The similarities in the latter are easier to recognise when tracing their developments from the Brāhmī. Even here, it is only a student of palaeography and epigraphy who can so recognise the relationship. Jñānasambandar and Tirumalicai Ālvār, if they were to come back, are likely to read our *ka* as *ta* or *ca*. We are likely to take similarly their written form for the dental *ta* as *ka* or *ca* and the mediaeval copyists have indeed made such mistakes.

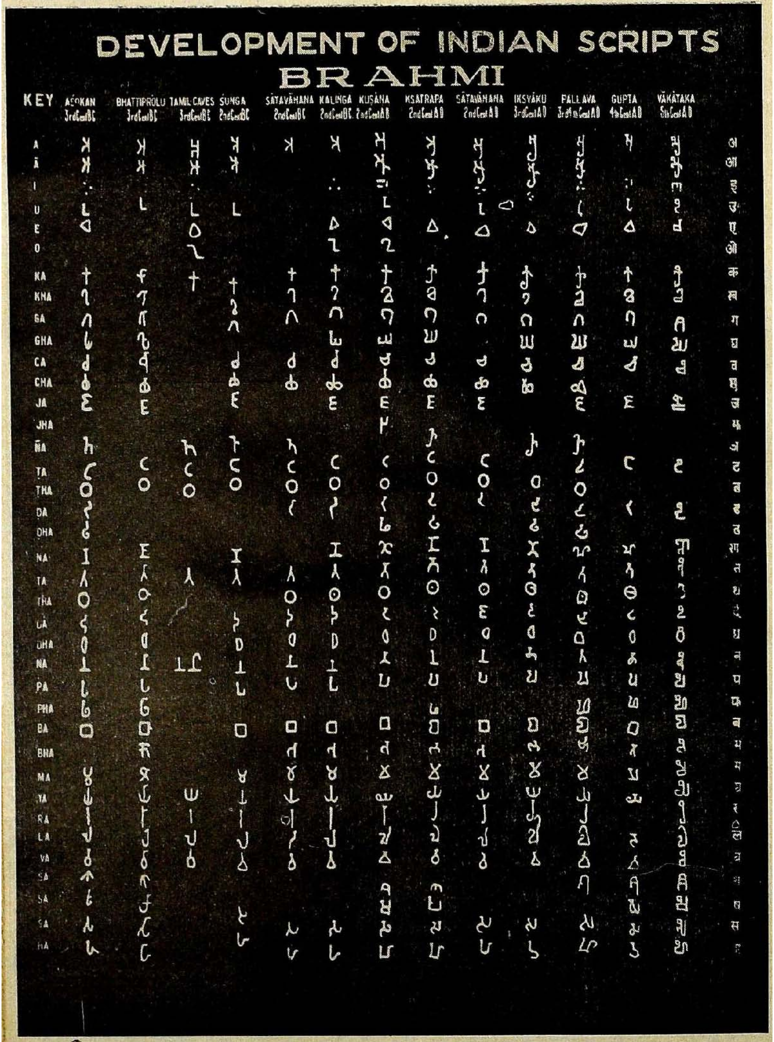
The earliest Tamil inscriptions were written in the Brāhmī script, differing from the northern script to such an extent as to warrant their title to be called the southern script. In this script, we have separate symbols for the peculiar Tamil sounds,

Inscribed seal from
Mohen-jo-Daro



Brāhmī Inscription on the Rummindei Pillar. The lines read from left to right as follows :

1 Devānampiyena Piyadasina lājina vīsativasābhisitena
2 atana āgācha mahīyite hida Budhe jāte Sakyamunīti
3 silāvigaḍabhīchā kālāpita silāṭhabhe cha usapāpite
4 hida Bhagavam jāte ti Lumminigāme ubalike kaṭe
5 aṭhabhāgiye cha

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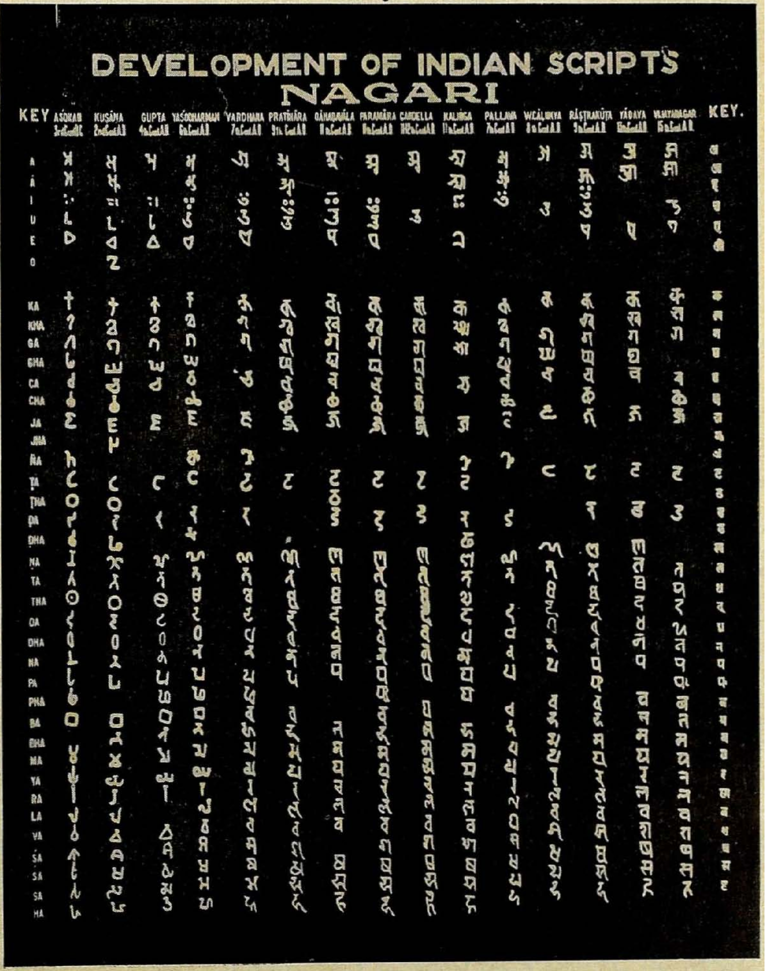


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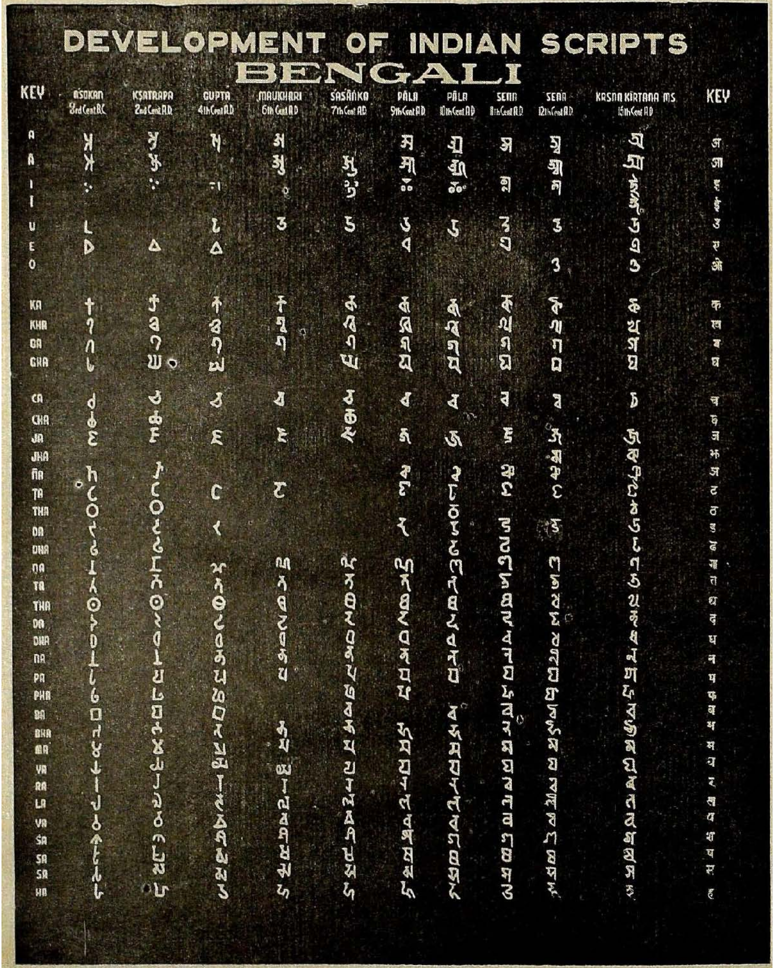


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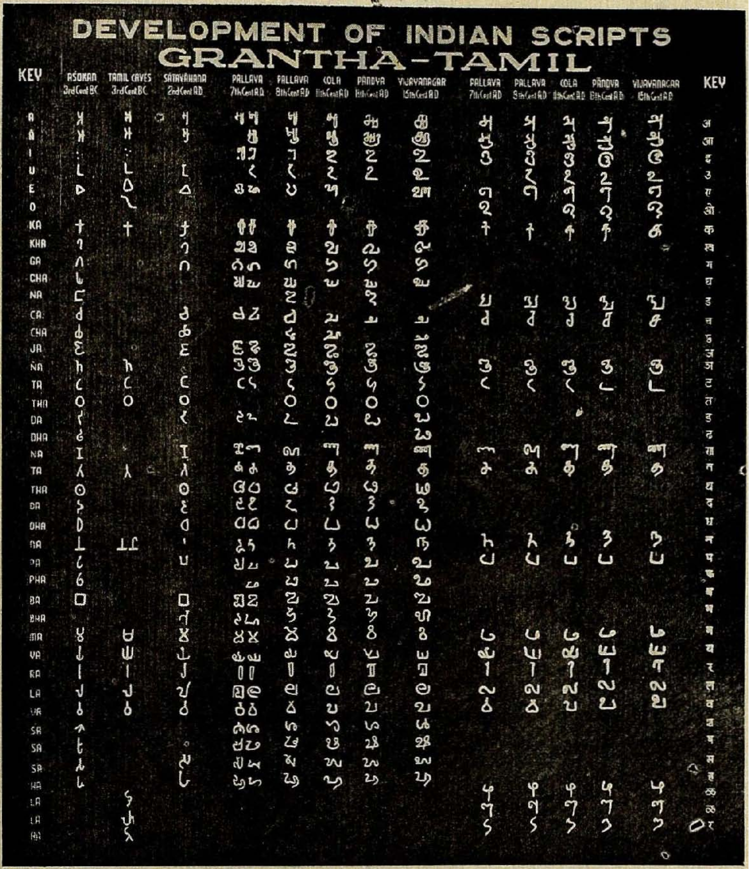


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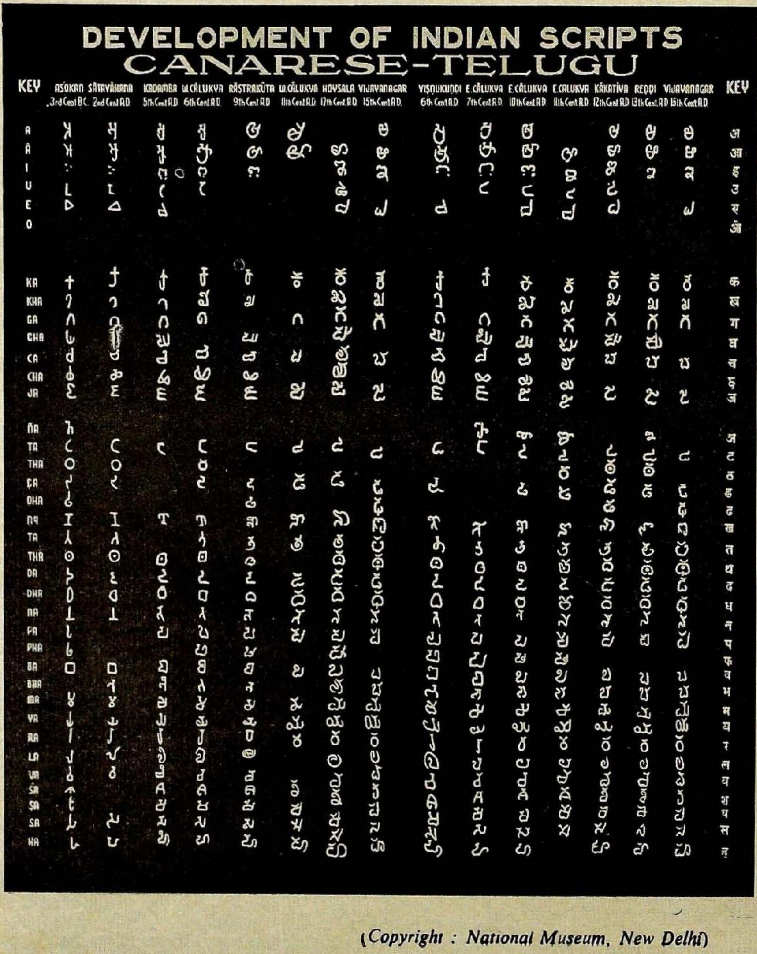


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Transliteration into various Indian languages of the Sanskrit words सत्यमेव जयते (*Satyameva jayate*—Truth alone triumphs):

| | |
|---|---|
| ASSAMESE | সত্যমেৱ জয়তে |
| BENGALI | সত্যমেব জয়তে |
| GUJARATI | સત્યમેવ જયતે |
| HINDI | सत्यमेव जयते |
| KANNADA | ಸತ್ಯಮೇವ ಜಯತೇ |
| KASHMIRI | ستیٔمیو جیٔتے |

| | |
|---|---|
| MALAYALAM | സത്യമേവ ജയതേ |
| MARATHI | सत्यमेव जयते |
| ORIYA | ସତ୍ୟମେବ ଜୟତେ |
| PUNJABI | ਸਤਯਮੇਵ ਜਯਤੇ |
| TAMIL | சத்தியமேவ ஜயதே |
| TELUGU | సత్యమేవ జయతే |
| URDU | ستیہ میو جیئتے |

the alveolar *t* (ற), the alv olar nasal *n* (ன) as distinct both from the cerebrals and the dentals. It had also a symbol peculiar for *ḻ* (ழ) which looks like a capital English G as found in the cursory writing. The modern *G* is more or less similar. There are also minute differentiations between the short *e* and long *e* and between the short *o* and long *o* in the syllables, mainly depending on the length of the horizontal line proceeding from the top of the consonant towards the left. The dental *n* (ந) of the old Brāhmī is a horizontal straight line on which stands a perpendicular straight line in the middle. The cerebral nasal ண consists of two parallel lines, both of which are joined by a perpendicular line in the middle. The alveolar nasal ன in this old southern script is like the dental nasal but to differentiate from it, there is a curve at the top of the perpendicular line turning and descending to the right. Gradually, the curve became a loop and ultimately developed into two loops as the modern alveolar nasal symbol in modern Tamil. Perhaps this suggests retroflexion. The dental plosive *t* (த) looks roughly like an inverted Y in the Brāhmī script and also in the earlier cave inscriptions. The cerebral plosive *t* (ட) is an arc of a curve both the ends of which face the right side. The alveolar plosive ற, from the point of view of its place of articulation, is between the cerebral and dental, and finds no place in the northern script but this sound has, in the southern script of Tamil land, found a symbol which begins like a cerebral *t* (ட) and ends in the lower portion like the dental *t* (த). This roughly suggests that the place of articulation of this sound is between the place of articulation of *t* (த) and *ṭ* (ட).

True to the genius of Tamil, we find in this southern script that the consonant as a separate consonant, differing from the syllable, is well represented ; what represents the consonant with *a* (அ) in the northern Brāhmī came to represent the consonant itself, whilst the short and long *ā* attached to the consonant to form a syllable were probably distinguished by greater and shorter length of the line drawn to the right from the top. One other peculiarity is that there is no *puḷḷi* or dot because there is no necessity as explained. *Puḷḷi* or dot is found in the later

Kōl eluttus of the Pallava age but t .s *puḷḷi* disappears again from the age of Rājarāja.

There are other changes as well. Even in the Asôkan script, *a* which was more or less like the English 'K' at times is found turned 180 degrees on the axis of the vertical line so as to face the left like a 'K' in the mirror. From this *a* (அ) had come the Grantha *a*, Tamil *a*, and Malayalam *a*. Then again, a letter which is vertical in the original becomes horizontal, turning later 90 degrees to the right. The cerebral nasal which consisted, as already stated, of two parallel horizontal lines with a vertical line connecting them, was turned 90 degrees, so that we have a horizontal line with vertical lines coming down therefrom. It is these downward lines that became the loops so as to give the modern form of the Tamil *ṇ* (ண) but Vatteluttu continued the vertical form. The angles of the letters sometimes become curved ; vertical lines assume the shape of test tubes turned upside down. Compare the old 'K' which was a cross with the modern curved representations in the various languages. The long *ī* in the Brāhmī script consisted of a vertical line, now like an inverted tube with a dot on either side. The *ī* in all the scripts seems to remind us even now of the original form.

The line denoting *e* in the syllable gradually became the rounded spiral called *kompu* in Tamil. The line proceeding to the right to denote *ā* later on descended down and finally became the inverted tube like parallel lines called *Kāl*. In the syllable, *i* was denoted by a horizontal line proceeding to the right and then going up to form an angle. This became later an inverted curve facing down. The diacritical mark for the old long vowel *ū* in the syllable consists amongst others of a vertical line drawn downwards. The beginning of letters came to be curved when writing on palmyra leaves. Originally, the independent *ū* was represented by a symbol like a right-angled English capital letter 'L' in print. The top then comes to be curved into a spiral and it will be seen that our modern Tamil உ thus changed, still bears resemblance to the original. Originally, *p* was represented by a symbol reminding us of an upward facing hook, where the left line was larger than the right. But, gradually, the lines became

equal. This is what we find in modern Tamil, but in Grantha and Vatteluttu the left side top begins to curve left into a spiral. These are the various ways in which the original southern Brāhmī developed into the Tamil Kōl eluttu, Vatteluttu and Grantha eluttu.

The cave inscriptions found in the southernmost districts of the Tamil land were ascribed to the third and second centuries B.C. on palaeographical grounds, though after the Arikāmedu excavations which brought to light certain potsherds with the Brāhmī script, this earlier age is not usually admitted. But this latter position is untenable. The Arikāmedu writing is a great landmark. But so are the earlier and later cave inscriptions. Tirunātha Kunṛann inscription is another but later landmark. We could fix the relative age of the inscriptions on the basis of the changes mentioned and also on the basis of the implied theory of writing. In the earlier inscriptions, geminated or long consonants are absent as in Sinhalese writing of that period. The single consonant itself was pronounced as a double consonant in some places. But, at a later time, the geminated consonants are written as double consonants. On this basis also, the relative age could be fixed.

It is only when one examines the inscriptions, copper plates and manuscripts arranged chronologically, for instance, as found arranged in the Archaeological Section of the Madras Museum that one becomes convinced that all the scripts of South India, viz., Grantha, Tamil, Malayalam and the old Vatteluttu really have their origin in the southern variety of the Brāhmī or Indian script.

The fact that all the Indian scripts go back to the Brāhmī script emphasises the fundamental unity of India. This is topically important at present as suggesting an additional reason, when the emotional integration is emphasised. Perhaps, Brāhmī, which word has nothing to do with the Brahmin, might be traced to the Mohen-jo-Daro script when the latter is deciphered.

# THE SCRIPTS OF SOUTH INDIA

## (Telugu-Kannada and Nandināgarī)

K. V. RAO

The oft-repeated expression, 'unity in diversity', as a fundamental aspect of Indian achievement, bears repetition in the context of the scripts of India also. Most of the languages of India borrowed the phonetic arrangement of the Sanskrit alphabet for their sounds and the Brāhmī script for their visual representation. Thus, the cultural unity of India came to be firmly based.

The two Dravidian languages, Telugu and Kannada, which occupy the middle position in India amply justify this. The writing system of these languages and their scripts bear ample testimony to their indebtedness to Brāhmī. Aśokan and other inscriptions in Brāhmī, found throughout the length and breadth of Mysore and Andhra Pradesh, show us the extent of the Brāhmī script in which regional variations are clearly discernible. Gradually, in the course of centuries, the southern variety of Brāhmī evolved into the archaic Telugu-Kannada script. This script, with minor local variations, was extensively used by all the ruling dynasties of the Deccan and the adjoining areas for centuries. In the West, this script was used in the inscriptions of the Kadambas of Banavāsi and of the early Cāḷukyas of Bādāmi. In the East, we find this script used by the Śālaṅkāyanas and the early Cāḷukyas of Vengi. Even as late as the 7th century, this archaic variety of the Telugu-Kannada script, used in the inscriptions of the East and the West, does not show many regional variations. The older inscriptions of this period remain much closer to the 'Cave Brāhmī Characters' than the inscriptions of the Śālaṅkāyanas and the

Kadambas. In these latter inscriptions, we begin to come across round forms of the letters.

This archaic variety of the Telugu-Kannada script evolved into a middle variety by about the middle of the 7th century. This variety was in use for about three centuries in the Deccan and the adjoining areas. In the West, we have this middle variety used extensively in the inscriptions of the Bādāmi Cāḷukyas, the Raṣṭrakūṭas of Mānyakheṭa, the Gaṅgas of Gaṅgavāḍi, Mysore, and other small dynasties. In the East, this script was used extensively by the Vengi Cāḷukyas and their vassals. During this period, we find some real differences between the various inscriptions. In the western Cāḷukyan inscriptions, we find a marked slope of the characters to the right; whereas the characters in the eastern Cāḷukyan inscriptions are square and upright. The alphabet also shows the beginning of a change in the writing of subscript vowels. This change, which later on formed the chief difference between the Telugu-Kannada script on the one hand and the Grantha on the other, is shown in marking the length of a consonant and in bringing the mark for a subscript from underneath the consonant to its right side.

For the first time in this period, the Telugu and Kannada languages figure in the inscriptions. Hitherto, though the script used was the Telugu-Kannada script, the language of the inscription was usually either Prakrit or Sanskrit. Of course, there are a few Telugu and Kannada words in the inscriptions of the respective regions, particularly when an inscription has to deal with names of villages and persons. One of the earliest Kannada inscriptions is an inscription of Cāḷukya Mangaleśa (598-610) outside the Vaiṣṇava cave at Bādāmi. The Halmidi inscription of Kākusthavarman is another. There is an endorsement in Kannada at the end of the Aihole inscription dated 634 A.D., of Pulakeśin II which is in Sanskrit. The endorsement may belong to a slightly later date. Though the copper-plates of the Bādāmi Cāḷukyas are mostly in Sanskrit, their stone inscriptions are largely in Kannada.

The earliest known Telugu inscriptions belong to the Telugu-Codas of Renadu. They are records on stone and are found in

the Anantpur and Kadapa districts of Andhra Pradesh. They are assigned to a period between the 6th and 8th centuries. There are twelve records altogether and all of them are in the early Telugu language. Even at this period we find Telugu and Kannada as distinct languages though the script is common. In the Kalamalla inscription of the Telugu-Codas, there are certain characters which resemble the Tamil-Grantha characters. We can take the medial *e* sign in *re* as an example. In the Era-agudipadu inscription belonging to the same age, we have the Dravidian sound *l̲* (ழ) in a Telugu inscription. This sound which is still found in Tamil and Malayalam is not found in Telugu and Kannada any more. This sound, a sort of re-troflex-fricative, was dropped in Telugu by about the middle of the 9th century and in Kannada, a little later.

The next stage of development of the Telugu-Kannada script is called the transitional stage. This variety does not differ much from the modern Kannada and Telugu scripts. In the East, this variety appears for the first time in the eastern Cāḷukyan inscriptions of about the 11th century and on the West, in a Ganga inscription a little earlier. Gradually, this stage leads to the next stage and, by about the 13th century, the differences slowly but surely separate the scripts. In fact, a Telugu poet of this age, Manchana, specifically mentions the 'Āndhralipi' by name.

In this transitional stage alone, letters developed the respective characteristic serifs which we find now in the Telugu and Kannada scripts. Kannada began marking long medial vowels by placing the signs to the right of the consonant on the same line. This was also the period when the *mahāprāṇa* letters got the sign of aspiration and the *anuswāra* got its characteristic form from a dot to a *bindu* and descended successively from the top of the letter to its right on the top and finally to a position between the consonants on the same line. Kannada retained the form characteristic of a consonant when it is combined with *repha*. This is still used in modern Kannada, whereas Telugu discarded it sometime in the last century. This is a very old practice and we find it in the Śālaṅkāyana inscriptions of the 4th century, in the

Viṣṇukuṇḍin inscriptions of the 6th century, in the Pallava inscriptions of the 7th and 8th centuries both in the Grantha and Telugu-Kannada scripts. This transitional period continued for some time till the scripts finally separated in the days of the Vijayanagara rulers or a little earlier.

With the introduction of printing in the early decades of the 19th century, these two scripts achieved a standardization and uniformity unknown before. This completed the separation in every way. But still, it is not very difficult for a person, who knows either of the scripts, to read the other script, thus bringing home to him the long centuries of association between them as also their common ancestry.

Now we come to the Nandināgarī script. Nandināgarī is the name of the Nāgarī script employed by the Vijayanagara rulers extensively for their copper-plate grants in Sanskrit and occasionally for inscriptions on stone. Besides, this script was used for transcribing Sanskrit manuscripts on palm-leaves in the past centuries. We have many such manuscripts in the Oriental libraries of South India.

The Nandināgarī script evolved out of a variety of Nāgarī prevalent in the middle region of India. One of the earliest inscriptions to show distinctly this variety of southern Nāgarī is the Samangaḍ grant of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa King, Dantidurga, dated 754 A.D. We have examples of the fully developed form of the southern Nāgarī in the inscriptions found in the Deccan as early as the first decade of the 11th century or even a little earlier. To a casual observer, the Nandināgarī and Devanāgarī scripts may look alike owing to a general similarity in orthography. But, on closer examination, the differences between them come out] very vividly, particularly in the case of certain characters like the labial mutes *b* (ब) and *bh* (भ) and the palatal sibilant *s* (श). The use of the sign *anuswāra* even for final *m* (म) and class nasals is one of the peculiarities of this script. The substituted *anuswāra* is put between the two consonants on the same line. This is also the position the *anuswāra* occupies in the Telugu and Kannada scripts.

This seems to be an influence of these scripts on the Nandināgarī script.

Before I conclude the discussion of the Nandināgarī script, I should like to give some details regarding a couple of typical Nandināgarī inscriptions. I select two from outside South India and two from inside. These inscriptions, which are on stone, show us that, besides the Vijayanagara rulers, others also favoured this script even from an earlier date. These inscriptions have some human interest.

The two inscriptions from outside South India are from Gayā, the famous pilgrim centre. A lady, by name Gauri, had *Gayā Śrāddha* performed for her deceased husband, Mallikārjuna, who belonged to the times of Kākati Pratāpa Rudra I of Warangal in the Telugu country. She had this inscription inscribed there. Some letters here clearly indicate Nandināgarī affiliations of the script. This belongs to the 12th century.

The other inscription belongs to the times of Hoysala Narasimha III in the 13th century. A devotee from the Kannada area got a *maṭha* constructed there and the inscription gives details of it. But the most interesting part of this inscription is its language. The language is Kannada and the script is Nandināgarī! An unusual combination. To give this 25-line Kannada prose inscription a fitting finale, the 25th line is in the Kannada script also and the name is Devarasa.

The other two Nandināgarī inscriptions are copper-plate grants, from South India. One is the Peyyalabanda grant of Śrī Kṛṣṇa Rāya, dated the 18th April, 1524 A.D.This is in the typical Nandināgarī script of the Vijayanagara rulers, and is in Sanskrit verse. But lines 88 to 98 are in Kannada prose in the same Nandināgarī! The inscription ends with 'Śrī Virūpākṣa', written in the Telugu-Kannada script.

The next one is the Kandukuru grant of Venkaṭapati Deva I, dated the 21st April, 1613 A.D. in Sanskrit in Nandināgarī. All the plates are numbered in Telugu numerals. The inscription ends with 'Śrī Venkaṭeśa', written in Telugu characters. Besides, lines 148 to 152 are in Telugu. This deals with the grant of some lands and fields to Lord Venkaṭeśwara of Tirupati. Thus these

scripts of South India also reveal and reaffirm the basic and fundamental unity of Indian culture.

We may as well say that Indian culture is one though expressed in different ways in different regions.

# THE PERSO-ARABIC SCRIPT

M. MUJEEB

"My pen works miracles" wrote Mir Ali, a calligraphist of Jahangir's court, "and rightly enough is the *form* of my words proud of its superiority over *meaning*. To each of the curves of my letters the vault of heaven acknowledges its bondage, and the value of each of my strokes is eternity itself." Mir Ali could say this because the calligraphist was admired as much as the poet, the painter, the architect and ranked high among the creators of the most cherished forms of beauty. He was definitely superior to others because his profession was recognized by law and religion as one of the most worthy. Copying out the *Quran* was almost as meritorious as teaching and reciting it, and anyone who wrote out the Holy Book in a beautiful hand was deemed to have performed a most acceptable act of worship. Calligraphy was also an art which had absorbed in itself the aesthetics of composition, line and movement, and cultured persons were expected to derive from it the exquisite pleasure of poetry. There was little reason, therefore, for the master of calligraphy to be modest.

Writing was not raised to the level of an art for the first time by the Muslims. The Iranians, particularly the Manichaeans, had cultivated it, and they acquired a taste for it from the peoples of Central Asia, who were most probably influenced by the artists and calligraphists of the Han and T'ang dynasties. From the purely materialistic point of view, the cultivation of calligraphy can be traced to the manufacture of paper and the use of pen and ink. This again takes us to China, where paper was first made and where the first book was printed around 600 A.D. Calligraphy became significant and widely practised as a profession among Muslims because books were much in demand. Copies of the *Quran* were needed by the hundred thousand. It was

obligatory for every Muslim to read the Holy Book, which meant at least that there would be a copy of the *Quran* in every house. The calligraphist had to know his art well because it would have been irreverent to write the Holy Book without an honest effort to make the script look attractive. The evolution of a concept of beauty in script is in itself an interesting aspect of history.

Pre-Islamic Arabia had a language of which the Arabs were proud, but writing was not common. The earliest extant document we have of Islamic days is almost a scrawl compared with the later refined script. Contacts with Syrians and Iranians created the idea of a standardized script with an aesthetic appeal, and thus appeared the different styles of what is known as the Kufi script. There are copies of the *Quran* in this script, but the *Quran* has to be read correctly, and the Kufi script, though capable of being given highly artistic ornamental forms, could not ensure correct reading. So the script known as the Naskh was evolved. In this the letters were clearly distinguished, diacritical marks could be used, and it could be written with much greater ease and speed. Both the Kufi and the Naskh scripts were adapted by Muslims of different countries to suit their own tastes. But when painting began to be practised as an art from the 13th century onwards, the calligraphists felt that the Naskh script did not offer opportunities for realising the full value of the line and the curve, and so a third style of writing was developed, known as the Nasta'liq. This brought calligraphy much closer to line drawing, and the illuminated manuscript became a synthesis of literature, painting and ornamentation.

We have in India specimens of all styles of writing. In the tomb of Iltutmish in Delhi, we find inscriptions in the Kufi style as fine as anywhere else in the world and here and there are copies of the *Quran* in imposing, but almost illegible Kufic. The Naskh has been widely used, both in its decorative and utilitarian forms. But the style for which Persian and Urdu-knowing Indians have opted most wholeheartedly is the Nasta'liq, and its shorthand form, known as the Shikast. Apart from books in Arabic, all the others have been written and are now being printed in Nasta'liq. It was the style used in official correspondence, in firmans and legal

documents; it is now the style used for Urdu. Its shorthand form, the Shikast, was used for taking notes in the royal courts and later in the courts of law, for correspondence and private records. For the Urdu-speaking Indian, basic literacy has consisted in the ability to read and write Nasta'liq and Shikast.

One of the things for which I personally feel grateful is the punishment I got for bad writing when I was being taught the Urdu alphabet. I feel now that I was punished not for carelessness or ineptitude only but for lack of respect for culture. A person's handwriting is also a form of self-expression, and till early in this century it was assumed, I think quite reasonably, by those using the Perso-Arabic script that indifference to handwriting indicated indifference to culture as a synthesis of the various types of excellence. Everyone who could write had to be something of a calligraphist, to know how to give a proper point to a reed pen, to mix his own ink, and to make his writing conform to the standards of elegance that had been achieved in the forms of address and methods of expression. The Perso-Arabic script is not only a way of writing with a long history behind it, not only a heritage of great aesthetic value, but a symbol of the essential unity of culture and art and an urge to the achievement of excellence in everything that is done.

We are living, however, in a scientific, technological and necessarily utilitarian age. Many questions have to be answered before the full contemporary value of Perso-Arabic as well as of other Indian scripts can be assessed. How long does it take to learn reading and writing the script ? Can it be used without unnecessary cost and inconvenience in all the processes of correct and good printing? Can it meet all the demands of education in science and technology? How does it compare in legibility with the Roman script? The answers to these questions that are habitually given in India by the advocates of different scripts are based more on sentiment and political policy than on objective reason. Following the general practice, I could say that the Nasta'liq form of the Perso-Arabic script is as good as any other. On the basis of experiments made, it has been found that adults of less than average intelligence can learn to

write it in 35 half-hour or 17 full-hour lessons, and those who speak Urdu or some form of Hindustani but cannot write it could learn to do so in ten days. The number of spelling mistakes made by those learning Urdu is certainly not more than students generally make in English. If the lithographic process is adopted, printing of the Perso-Arabic script can be cheaper and almost as quick as in type. Correct printing, as we all know, is a matter of luck. But the most ardent lover of the Perso-Arabic script will hesitate to maintain that the ordinary lithographic process could be used for printing scientific or technological works. As regards legibility, it could be said in defence of the Perso-Arabic script that judgements on this point are liable to be subjective. I for one would not, however, leave it at that. The Perso-Arabic script cannot be reduced below a certain point without becoming illegible. It may not be inferior to Hindi in this respect, but it cannot by any means compare with the Roman.

Would it be advisable, in the interest of the survival of Urdu, which means the adaptability of Urdu as a language to all the modern requirements of scientific education and the preparation of scientific and technological literature, to discard the Perso-Arabic script ? The answer to this is that if by the Perso-Arabic script we mean the Naskh script, which is used in all the Arabic-speaking countries and Iran, the question of a change in script does not arise. But in India a very large minority, if not the majority, of those who speak Urdu and are keenly interested in its survival are non-Muslims. They regard the Nasta'liq script, which is now being used, as Indian and the Naskh as Islamic. Urdu being an Indian language, its script should also be Indian. They are not interested in the historical origins of Urdu or of the scripts in which it could be written, and if they had to choose between Urdu in the Naskh or the Roman script, they might choose the Roman. Muslims who desire the survival of Urdu should consider this matter with all seriousness. They are themselves not used to the Naskh script, and apart from some rare examples, books and journals printed in Naskh type have not been popular Nasta'liq type cannot be made without destroying all the beauty of the script, and even if its beauty is sacrificed, the technical

difficulties in using this type are formidable. The Perso-Arabic scripts are creations of great beauty, but the Urdu language is more precious than the script in which it is written. Its survival is not threatened by other languages, nor is the Perso-Arabic script endangered by other Indian scripts. The real risk lies in the possibility of the script isolating the Urdu language from the modern world of science and technology, and delaying the attainment through Urdu of the knowledge which moves the wheels of modern life.

# THE ROMAN SCRIPT

V. K. Gokak

The Roman script has a history dating back to about 3000 years. The Greek names for the letters of the Roman alphabet, *alpha*, *beta*, etc., correspond closely to the Semitic names, *aleph*, *beth*, and so on. The Latin alphabet was derived from the Western Greek alphabet by contact with the Greek colonies of southern Italy. It is from the Latin alphabet that the scripts of most of the modern European languages were drawn.

Let us look a little closely into the evolution of the Roman script. The Phoenicians were the first to evolve an alphabet, a writing system in which signs represented sounds.

Around 1300 B.C., the Phoenicians who used Egyptian words evolved a new arrangement. When they started trading with Chaldea, they required a new way of writing for their own words. They had 22 consonant sounds in their speech. They tried to symbolise these sounds by selecting an object for each sound that had that particular sound at the beginning of its name. Thus the word for 'fish' in their language was *nun*. The picture of fish was used by them to represent the consonant soundn. The whole word *nun*, would be shown by two fish. The vowels were considered unimportant and were not represented.

The names and pictures were then made into a list and taught in temple-schools. The first five were objects common about the home or highway—ox, house, barrier, camel and books. The next six were parts of the human body. The other eleven were objects like waves, fish, balance, etc.

The Greeks, who met the Phoenicians in the Black Sea area, got the alphabet from them. Legend has it that Kadmus, a Phoenician prince, came to Central Hellas, founded a city and adjusted the Phoenician way of writing to Greek uses.

The Greeks found some of the names easy, for they already had the first consonant sound of these names. They turned *beth* into *beta*, *gimel* into *gamma*, *daleth* into *delta*, *nun* into *nu*, and so on. They dropped the consonant in *qoph* and had *kopps* instead. They changed the consonant in *teth* to *theta.*

Their greatest contribution to the development of a phonetic alphabet came, as it were, by accident. They found the consonants in four others of the Phoenician names of objects unpronounceable. They left the first sounds and used the names for the second sounds which were vowels. Thus they got four vowel sounds which were not there in the Phoenician list and renamed them.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Aleph > | A > | alpha |
| Hē > | ē | ē-psilon (merely e) |
| Kheth > | ē | (long-E) ēta |
| Ayin > | ē | ē>o-micron (little o) |

Two others also became vowels with the Greeks :

| | |
|---|---|
| Yodh > | i-ota |
| Waw > | u-psilon |

These are now either consonants or vowels because of the general adoption of later Roman practice.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Yodh > | Y | as consonant or I as vowel. |
| Waw > | | or u |

Kadmus probably never told the Greeks the meaning of Aleph, etc. They only knew them as forms and changed them as they liked, e.g., < to A.

In the days of Kadmus, the Greeks wrote from right to left, as the Phoenicians did. The Arabs have retained this Phoenician manner even today. Later, the Greeks wrote one line to the left, the next to the right, then one again to the left,—as a person would plough a field. Around 500 B.C., they settled upon the left-to-right manner as the best. The Romans used to write from right to left in the manner of the Etruscans through whom they had borrowed the script. But they began to write from left to right like the Greeks around 300 B.C.

The Romans used only capital letters. How then did the other complication in the Roman script arise—the distinction between capitals and the small letter forms ? This came about because of the use of new writing material—parchment—in the later years of the Roman Empire.

During the thousand years that followed the decline of the Roman Empire, the writing style shifted from the formal capitals to the smaller and more rounded letter forms. The *Alcuin Bible*, written between 630 A.D. and 830 A.D., gave the printed small letters. Alcuin used capitals only for the titles of the Bible books. Later book scribes used them for new sentences and new sections. The English scribes also used a capital letter for the personal pronoun I.

Another anomaly relating to the Roman alphabet concerns the oddities in the names of the alphabet letters. *Aitch* started out as *Hay* in the Latin manner. But the *h* sound has now been left out. Again *u* (for *oo*) is called *yoo*, the $\overline{oo}$ sound being left out. The Latin name for *C* was *kee*. This has become *see*. But there is already a letter *es* (*S*) for this *s* sound. The Latin name for *G* was *Gay*. This needed to be kept. But it has become *jee*, thus causing confusion with *jay* which is the name for the sound of *J*.

The Roman script stands in the forefront of the world's scripts today. "The present hegemony of Western civilization" says Mr I. J. Gelb, "manifests itself in the widespread proposals, more or less successful, to impose the Latin writing upon the world. The acceptance of Latin writing by the Turks, its widespreading use by African and American natives, the proposals concerning the romanization of Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, and Persian are the best manifestations of this trend."[1]

Turkey adopted the Roman system largely because the only system that it had—the Arabic—could not without distortion represent many of the Turkish vowels and consonants. It was also a bid for modernisation. It is not surprising that African and American natives accept the Roman script; for, in most cases,

1. *A Study of Writing*, p. 240

they have no script of their own. More often than not, they also accept the English language as their first language and western civilization as their civilization. The Chinese script has 42,000 separate characters,—pictograms, ideograms and phonograms. It is the script that unifies Chinese culture, holding together a group of people with different speeches. But China is adopting the Roman script for teaching the pronunciation of the official language to the speakers of other forms of Chinese and all other speakers.

We should not assume that the Roman script is one and identical all over the world. The Turks, for instance, use the Latin sign *c* for the sound *j* as in 'jig'. "The limitless homophony of signs is best illustrated by the spellings of the name of the famous Russian writer Chekhov, in which the initial sound can be written as *Ch*, *Tch*, *C*, *Tsch*, *Tsj*, *Tj*, *Cz*, *Cs*, or *Č*, the medial consonant as *kh*, *ch*, *k*, *h*, or *x*, and the final one as *v*, *f*, or *ff* in various systems of the world, all using Latin signs."[1] The most widespread reforms have taken place within many national writings in order to simplify spellings. Some people, like the Finns, have succeeded in achieving an almost phonetic system. Others, like the British, continue to carry the burden of traditional spellings. Thus, there is a bewildering variety within the Latin manner of writing itself.

It is essential immediately to use the Roman script at least for presenting Indian writing to the readers in foreign lands.

But Roman script in what form ? Shall we use the form with diacritical marks ? It is too cumbrous. The Roman script with simplified spelling ? As Mark Twain says, simplified spelling offends the eye and takes the expression out of the words because of its strangeness.

There are several rivals of the Roman script competing for the position of a world script and we may look at them in passing. They are all of European origin and some of them bear some relation or the other to the Roman script. What we want in

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1. *A Study of Writing*, p. 240

these days of space travel is a system of writing in which signs have identical phonetic correspondences all over the world.

Modern shorthand produces the greatest possible saving in time and space. But it is a system used in addition to the national writing. It can't supplant the national writing; for, modern shorthand is not exact, being devised only for speed.

Jespersen's Analphabetic Notation and Pike's more elaborate system try to symbolise the articulation of the sound rather than its acoustic side. These are good as formulas for use in learned circles and not as practical systems of writing.

Pasigraphic systems aim at a universal alphabet in which signs and symbols stand for words and grammatical formatives which could be read differently although understood in the same way in various languages,—a device used commonly in our writing of numbers which can stand for different words in various languages. Isotype is a system of picture education. A series of pictures on how to use a telephone will be internationally understood. They can easily supplant long instructions given in different languages. But these systems cannot eschew inexactness and difficulty in mastering thousands of signs for different linguistic elements.

The one system that seems to hit the mark in the closest manner possible is the one advocated by Mr I.J. Gelb in *A Study of Writing*, a system which combines the exactness of the IPA (International Phonetic Association) alphabet with the formal simplicity of the shorthand system. The IPA alphabet preserves the closest correspondence between sign and sound, is based in a way on the Roman script, is easy and simple and is used widely for the transcription and transliteration of the various languages. The full system should contain signs for all the known sounds of the various languages. Out of this full system, smaller alphabets could be excerpted for use in individual languages.

If some day, the IPA alphabet is accepted generally, as an international script, we should not forget that it is the Roman script that made the IPA alphabet possible.

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